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The press and the CIA should act responsibly

In the Soviet Union there is no debate about how much information to make public about its intelligence network. Everything is secret and no one is allowed to object.

But in our country it works differently. Since we, the citizens and taxpayers, have a say in what our government does, we have a right to have at least some information about how the CIA and the National Security Agency are spending our money.

We depend on the press to report about these agencies on matters that do not endanger national security.

But there is a fine line there. Who decides what endangers national security? It would certainly be irresponsible for reporters to print the names of secret agents working abroad where their lives could be endangered. It would have been irresponsible to disclose in advance the plans for the raid on Libya.

On the other hand, leaders of the U.S. intelligence communities screamed "national security" after disclosure of the Pentagon papers, Watergate and attempts to overthrow the government of Chile. History has shown that in those cases the intelligence agencies were attempting to hide information from the American public, not protect national security.

This problem has surfaced again over CIA chief William J. Casey's threat to prosecute NBC news for disclosing information about the secrets that Ronald W. Pelton is charged with selling to the Soviets. The network reported that Pelton told the Soviets about the use of U.S. submarines in Soviet harbors to listen in on secret radio transmissions.

Casey has also asked the reporters covering Pelton's trial to refrain from "reporting details beyond the information actually released at the trial." He has asked reporters to check with him first before disclosing any new information so

Casey can decide whether or not it endangers national security.

At the trial itself, much of the testimony so far has involved references to "Projects A, B, C, D and E," that the government has failed to describe. Prosecutors said it did not matter what the projects were, only that they had been disclosed to the Soviets.

One of the problems here is that Casey seems to be very concerned about locking the barn door after the horse has already run away. If these projects have already been disclosed to the Soviets, why are they still secret? Is national security really involved here, or does the CIA just want to keep us from knowing about a controversial operation that might involve violations of the Soviets' territorial waters? Wouldn't we be upset if we found a Soviet submarine in the Potomac?

It's only natural that the CIA and the press are adversaries on these kinds of issues. The CIA's job is to keep secrets, the press's job is to protect the public's right to know.

There are documented cases where the press has withheld information because it felt disclosure would harm national security. During the Kennedy administration, The New York Times and other newspapers uncovered plans for the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba but chose not to print the story.

Reason should prevail on both sides. The news media are Americans who would not purposely act against the best interests of their country. The press can however, without knowing it, disclose information that would cause damage somewhere in the world. It needs to be careful.

On the other hand, the CIA needs to realize that not every piece of information that is disclosed threatens national security. It needs to understand the difference between damaging leaks and embarrassing leaks.

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